

Feminist Film Theory: a 1980 Talk

By Julia Lesage

This is a transcript of an impromptu lecture I gave that came back to me in written form in an entirely unforeseen way. In May, 1980, I was an invited guest to a large and wonderful conference in Amsterdam, organized by the Dutch feminist film group, Cinemien. It was the First International Feminist Film Conference and included women critics and makers from all over the world. I gave an impromptu lecture there on Feminist Film Theory.

Years later I was lecturing on women and film at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design when someone told me about an article by me on the school's course reserve, an article I did not remember anything about. I went to the library to look it up and found a transcript of that conference talk from years before. Someone must have taped that 1980 talk and typed it up. I post it here as an interesting example of early ideas from second wave feminism around women and film

FEMINIST FILM THEORY: Wednesday - Julia Lesage discussing her film course on domestic space

....I'm interested in the way that interiors are used to structure emotions and other set design is used to structure emotions. By talking about the filming of domestic space we see the ways in which film (and T.V.) is an artifact, is a construct and we also see the ideological nature of that construct. At the same time, film is a dramatic art and we can talk about the way that intimacy is filmed, the way that emotions are filmed. I think much of the discussion yesterday was about what would be a feminist way to create a feminist film structure for filming emotions and intimacy. Of course we can also talk about the way advertising manipulates emotion and intimacy within domestic space.

I am particularly interested in melodrama. It's a fictional form which coincides with the rise of the nuclear family, the rise of industrialization in the 18th and 19th century. It is a fictional form which has traditionally been accessible to women and which remains persistently popular in soap operas or telly novellas. I spend a lot of time talking about melodrama, the history of melodrama, its relation to the rise of women's literacy, its relation to the rise of a middle-class theatrical tradition in Europe, its relation to the rise of the tensions generated by a nuclear family that lives under capitalism. All of those things are coincident with each other and allow me to talk about many things. For example, to trace what we see in the telly novella, in the soap opera, to trace it back to an historical tradition, to trace it back to an understanding of the rise of certain material conditions. It is no coincidence, for example, that Freud's analysis of the family, the nuclear family, is presented at the same time that theatrical melodrama is at its height in Europe. It seems to me that the two strains are dealing with the same kinds of things; the two forms of expression, Freudian psycho-analysis and the melodrama, are dealing with the kinds of tensions generated within the nuclear family under capitalism. It seems to me that that's particularly one point in which I can take film studies and start to talk about a lot of political issues which I think are very important to address and to address them within a Marxist framework.

The other thing I can talk about when dealing with domestic space are the issues around the presentation of sexuality because

most sexual scenes are presented within domestic space. Again by looking at a purely cinematic analysis, the elements of artifice are very clear but also the elements of male dominance or of patriarchal fantasies which we can see operating on film. In other words, almost all films have a structure, for example, of who is sexually desirable and who is not sexually desirable. ^{stereotypes} Most visual images of men and women immediately elicit a response - that person is sexually desirable or that person is out of the dating game as it were - and in fact that is a kind of "come on" within the image; a kind of lure or bait within the image. So that all of those issues are available to me when I teach a course on domestic space.

Clearly I am not only interested in keeping women within that domestic space but I am interested in making domestic space an object of investigation. I can talk about the cinematic depiction of domestic space and thereby lead students to question the social construction of domestic space and the way we are led to interpret that space so that it no longer appears as natural. I think that the problem is that domestic space has not been seen as the locus of history. It has not been seen as shaped by material forces and many people do not understand how they interpret domestic space in terms of the mass media which is given to them to interpret domestic space. My clearest example of that is - the first time I kissed, I was appalled that the man's lips were soft because my whole image of growing up in the '40's and '50's was they were supposed to be so hard - I was totally clued into movie kisses and I thought that I was going to get some electric shock. It was a clear example to me of the formative effect of media on my own life.

Some of the things I bring in from other disciplines are this. I think that Marxism as, let's say, exemplified by Marx's Capital, the discussion of the relations of production, mentions something which is called the reproduction of the force of labour, the reproduction of labour power. In other words, within the home, workers go home to eat, they sleep and a new generation of children are raised. Now Marx points out that this is what the worker does with his money. He buys the necessities to reproduce labour. What isn't pointed out in Marx and what I think is a necessary feminine amplification of Marx's theory is the labour that goes on in the domestic sphere, the know of work that is equally important for productive society but which is seen as ahistorical, which is seen as "not part of the productive forces" It's very important for me to consistently

amplify that element of socialist theory. I'm a strong supporter of the Cuban revolution and some of the communist revolutions in eastern Europe but one of the things you see is that the nuclear family is reproduced in almost exactly the same form because it has never been questioned. For example, in Cuba there is a housing shortage. The only way you can get a new apartment is to be married and have children. If a group of us wanted to get an apartment together, there's not a social mechanism for that. In China, for example, only women do child care. Because of these issues, anybody who's interested in building communist theory really has to examine the historical and material nature of what women's work is.

The other thing that's fascinating to me in film is the erasure of domestic labour. One of the things you can constantly teach in any film course about domestic space is in soap opera, who does the dishes? Who ever changes the diaper in movies? What person is ever shown doing extensive labour in the house? In other words, the constant erasure of labour is shown. Although some of women's psychological labour is shown but not acknowledged as labour. It's acknowledged as suffering, sacrifice. One of the kinds of labour that we women do is keep conversations going. There's a lot of labour in keeping a conversation going. You say "Oh yes." If you don't say "Oh yes", the conversation doesn't go. That is actually work that goes on in society to maintain culture. Women sociologists have investigated this and found that this is labour done by women. Much of the psychological labour that goes on in society is done by women - part of our socialization.

The other thing that I want to discuss when I teach this course is to discuss some of these issues in anthropological and historical terms. One of the things we know from feminist anthropology is that there is cross-culturally and transhistorically, that is, across culture and across history, a division between public and private space. Women are mostly relegated to private space which is the space of everyday labour. Public space, particularly the official positions in religion (and you know what official positions in religion do) or the special parties, or the special occasions or the special events, or technology in our own culture or government, is relegated to men. Even in a matrilineal or matrilocal society; that is, even in societies where a man goes to live with his wife's family or in a society where, for example, there's a queen and the queenship is passed on to the queen's daughters, this kind of division

still adheres. There are ceremonial rituals reserved for the men, and women are mostly in charge of the food which is not considered spectacular food, no celebration is made for bringing that food in.

And I want to talk about that at the same time I want to talk about how issues like love and romance and sexuality are cross-culturally our cross-cultures are really divided quite differently, yet we have not studied the impact of film on these cultures. Our versions of romance are shown all across the world and in fact are understood in cities all across the world and even worse, pornography is seen in every capital city of the world. And so, whatever images of sexuality were inherent in the indigenous culture, there is now an overlay of pornography. I think that these things have to be considered because we don't want to take the kinds of images we have as universal, but I think we want to talk about the spread of those kinds of images throughout the world and what they mean and what they mean to people.

I want to talk about power relations. A lot of times students ask, "What do you mean when you say, sexual politics?" I want to talk about the fact that, in film, the depictions of men and women are very often about power relations. In other words, even when they don't look to be about power relations they are about power relations. For example, there is a uniform of power which is a suit and tie. What you wear to go for an interview, you wear the suit of power to show that you would be worthy of power. What can a woman do who is in a bikini, who is naked, who is in a negligee? She is given a costume which is not only sexually suggestive or explicitly suggestive, but that costume, including nudity which is also a costume, is literally a costume of powerlessness. One of the most striking images was when Steve Biko was tried in South Africa. When he was put in jail he was kept nude for the entire time. Steve Biko was an African leader in the Soweto uprising. One of the ways he was degraded when he was in prison, when he was on trial, he was kept naked. That was a deliberate act of humiliation which was appalling. But it's not interpreted always to see women's nudity as an image of keeping her not only in the realm of domestic space but an image of keeping her totally from the realm of social power.

I teach from the history of literature. Since I teach men I have to have some bait to get them into the course. Bait is what you put on the fish hook in order to catch the fish. I have to have some bait to get them into the course and most men who are in a film

course think of themselves as the sensitive soul. The sensitive soul never wants to be sexist, he never wants to abuse women, he probably does not involve himself in institutional struggles for women, but he wants to think of himself as a nice guy. So I very often start out the course with an analysis of the "romantic hero." An analysis of the romantic hero leads us quickly into what are different options for men and women under capitalism. A male under capitalism has the option of being a boss and an exploiter, or a worker and bored and frustrated who might go home and think he should be lord of his own castle at home. Most of the men in a film course wanted neither to be the boss nor the worker, not the man who's the capitalist nor the man who works on the assembly line, but they wanted to be the romantic hero, the creative person. I point out that for women under capitalism the options were somewhat different. A woman can ordinarily be in the circle of the domestic sphere, that is, in the home. She can get jobs in the public sphere that are similar, which is similar to the domestic sphere - the school, the restaurant, the store, the service job. In fact the women who have to do the worst work, take jobs that are exactly like their own jobs at home. Black women who have to raise a family in the U.S. go out to be a maid in someone else's house. This is true in South America. And they receive less money than anyone else in society even though they may be the only income provider for their family. I often talk about women's labour choices as three concentric circles; the domestic sphere, the public sphere similar to the domestic sphere, and then that outer public sphere which is the sphere of science and technology and political power and business executives. Every so often Fortune magazine makes a list of the 100 top executives or richest people etc. in the U.S. and the only women in that list are women who inherited these businesses from their families. I mention that because the choices for women under capitalism are very different from men so for example for me to become a university professor means that I'm choosing the best job that I have. For a man to become a university professor means that he probably had enough intellect to become pretty rich but he didn't want to be insensitive and an exploiter so he chose to move down in social status and to do what he is doing. My clinching argument in this case is that women who work very often work but still take their identity from the domestic sphere. In other words, they work but they still very often take their prime identity from being wife, mother, provider, etc. and work is something they do to maintain

the home. Not always. But the man who chooses to become the romantic hero, he goes into drugs - a great example in the U.S. is Henry Thoreau who went off to Walden Pond to find out what reality really was by living in the woods. I say they go off and live in the woods, maybe smoke a little dope, they burn themselves like a candle at both ends and destroy their psyche, like the image from Thomas Mann, in the process of making the great creation, they go up like flame. But they never go back home to take care of children when they decide, in literature in particular, that they don't want to be a worker on the assembly line, they don't want to be a boss who's a capitalist. They don't decide to become a mommy. I raise this because I have to have some way of beginning to get the discussion going in class where I can put out that the options for men and women are different and have been different historically.

Also to bring the subject of romantic hero up is wonderful for film teaching. Just about every film has got a wonderful romantic hero. Like *Serpico* who says, "I've got to go out and catch the drug dealers and if you keep me at home, I'll just leave you." Or all of the film noir heros. They have the wounded soul and they leave women behind and they look a little burnt out, exhausted. Once you can get students to spot the emergence of the romantic hero in film after film you can begin to get them to be critical of that image. In other words, there's this guy, he's worn himself out, he's on the road, he's beaten up and that seems to be like this relatively heroic image, even if it's an anti-hero, even if he's a failure. But you can begin to discuss the sexual politics of the constant reemergence of that image because after all, who are creating those images? Male writers who are themselves fantasizing themselves as romantic heros. Look at, for example, Coppola's Apocalypse Now. The guy, he's wandering, he encounters the image of absolute evil, he burns himself out, the world burns him out. I mean, time and again you get the sense that romantic heros are writing about romantic heros. And I think it's very interesting to raise the question, particularly if you have creative women in your class who desire to become filmmakers or artists themselves, if that image is appropriate for women. I used to think it wasn't but I found a few films that women have made in which they present themselves as that and I re-presented them to raise that discussion. (Question from someone - "Can I ask you what films you mean that you say women have made?") There's a film in the U.S. called Susanna by Susanna Blou-

stein about a lesbian artist presenting a kind of autographical portrait of herself and she very much presents herself as the sort of eternal wanderer, the person who doesn't fit in with her family. The romantic hero is constantly doing this kind of self-questioning: Where am I going? - tormented, moved down almost to a position of paralysis by self-doubt. Now I'm not saying that women don't get paralyzed but I think we get paralyzed for some other reasons. Those are some issues that I like to raise.

From there I ought to move to some area which is completely different which is to discuss how it is that we present black women, third world women and working class women and to discuss the issues that are raised by the naturalist tradition and in our own time by feminist documentaries, by cinema verite. Some of the most interesting and detailed descriptions we have of the domestic sphere come from the naturalist tradition, particularly in the 19th century. I think, for example, of Emile Zola's novel Germinal. We have very few other real detailed descriptions of life in the domestic sphere. In fact, Zola was an ardent advocate of birth control to free women from having children as soon as they menstruated which was very much ahead of his time. But I want to question that tradition and what the limitations of that tradition are, which are, of course, the limitations that stand only of the surface of people's lives. In Marxist terms, it would be a critique of empiricism. By staying only on the surface of people's lives, by examining only the surface phenomena, you may miss many important details. And of course, women artists have been perhaps the first to challenge this tradition, since women artists have been interested in exploring many areas of subjectivity. This has been a prime concern of women artists. I raise that issue particularly in terms of films by and about the working class, black women or third world women because, in a sense, cinema verite documentary and naturalist literature have given us many of the only pictures we have of the lives of the poor. So we can say that the form itself has many severe limitations. On the other hand we would have to ask ourselves what could we do without that form, particularly in historical terms of what we would know about the lives of the poor. And I think this discussion has actually been raised in the third world women's workshop about documentary filmmaking and ethnographic filmmaking and objectivity and some of those issues about how you're going to get to know things about people's lives.

I want to talk a little bit in the course about genres. I spend quite a bit of time on melodrama because I think women use melodrama. I think women use melodrama to talk about emotional situations. The melodrama is not basically a coherent narrative in terms of a cohesive beginning, middle and end. It very often wanders from situation to situation; particularly the soap opera wanders from situation to situation. But each situation is a kind of heightened emotional expression, particularly of some problem in intimate relations. It's very interesting to me to hear people talk about melodrama or to look at these columns in the newspaper which are like advice to people about love, or advice to people about marriage because they treat each just like a soap opera. In the U.S. one of them is called Ann Landers or another one is called Can This Marriage Be Saved? It's a column in the Ladies Home Journal. I'm interested in having students examine those forms because I think the form of Can This Marriage Be Saved? which is like a documentary report in a magazine, and the soap opera look almost exactly alike. I want to get students to start to examine how it is that we structure our discussions about intimate life. I think that we use melodrama a lot to structure our discussions about intimate life and I'm particularly interested in the possibilities inherent in that and the limitations of that form. I think the limitations of that form are pretty obvious.

Other genres that I consider in the course are the gothic tradition and its extension in film noir or horror films. The house is the locus of seduction, mystery, terror, anger. Historically the two genres that appealed most to women in Europe with the rise of literacy were the gothic novel and the melodrama. These were what the servants were reading to each other in the servant's quarters when somebody could read. It also coincides with the rise of literacy for the working classes. In fact those two genres have had tremendous appeal to women across history. I'm interested in thinking about what the appeal for women is of the gothic and how that genre has become changed into perhaps a more male form, into the thriller in film noir. I'm fascinated by that but I don't have an exact analysis of it. I look at it in psychoanalytic terms and it seems to me that the house in some way, or domestic space, in light of those genres represents the mother, the possibility that the mother might go bad. In many horror films it seems to me that there's a male fantasy of the nurturing force turned evil. It's almost a cliché after a while if you look

at it in a horror film. One of the indices of terror is that domestic space would be evil and so that the house itself, it seems to me, is like the threatening mother or the possibility of the whole world turning evil being represented by domestic space turning evil. It's particularly interesting to me to notice how domestic space can be used to portray evil because I think it's a reflection of how women can be seen as not fulfilling their proper role when they're not doing what's right.

In many films, once the filmmaker has decided to say how we will show how the rich are decadent, they show female sexuality. Either the woman is smoking a cigarette and her legs are crossed like this or she's dancing wildly or, or . . . I have to go translate my Spanish.

(Copies of the book that Julia made up for her students in the class on domestic space can be purchased by sending her 20 American dollars)